

IN THOSE DAYS AND AT THIS TIME: LYRIC AND IDEOLOGY IN SHULAMITH HAREVEN'S SHORT STORIES¹

by

YUDITH NAVE

Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA 02181

Shulamith Hareven is one of the finest Israeli contemporary writers whose journalistic writings are a sincere and continuous attempt to instill human and national values and to fight anything that endangers them. For more than three decades Hareven has been regularly publishing essays in the most influential newspapers in Israel, selections from which were published in two books, *The Dolcinea Syndrome* (1981) and *Messiah or Parliament* (1987). Hareven's writings reflect her strong belief in Zionism as the only political solution for the Jewish people, and in socialism and constitutional democracy as the best systems to secure human rights. Since the establishment of the state of Israel she has been fighting for civil rights and human dignity for Jews and Arabs. In 1973 she became an active member of the Peace Now movement.

Hareven's literary works stem both from these didactic goals and from her personal life experiences. The few biographical details published about her are summarized by Kressel (1965, p. 626) in two laconic sentences: "Hareven (maiden name: Riftin) was born in Warsaw in 1931. She was brought to Israel with her parents in 1940 and was educated in Jerusalem." Approximately three years ago, she was asked in an interview by Haim Chertok (1989, p. 77) to describe her upbringing. Hareven

1. All emphases are mine unless noted otherwise. Transliterations will vary from the adopted transliteration system in the following cases: 1) quotations, 2) names previously transliterated and published, and 3) names previously transliterated in a different system will be used where they best demonstrate the argument. Quotations from *The Miracle Hater* refer to Halkin's translation; however, at times I felt the need to alter his version according to my interpretation. Yet, all page numbers refer to his translation. I am deeply indebted to the editor, Theodore J. Lewis, whose valuable suggestions went far beyond the call of duty, and to Phyllis Birnbaum and Elsa Stanger who helped me with the English.

started with the time she served as a Hagana member during the days of the War of Independence. Chertok responded with some amazement: "You've skipped over quite a few years." He then asked her to tell something about her early childhood, but she refused to volunteer any additional details. The more Hareven refuses to disclose any biographical facts and vigorously denies any connection between her private life and her literary work, the more strongly she suggests that there is something too deep, private, and complicated to be discussed in public. This secret may in fact be the source from which her literary work stems.

Since 1962 Hareven has published several collections of poetry, short stories, essays and one novel, *ʿîr yāmîm rabbîm* (1972, translation 1977). Her stories may be classified into two major groups: stories published before 1980 and those published after. The two groups differ in structure and in style, reflecting Hareven's lyrical and political response to two traumatic experiences—the Holocaust, and the political turmoil in Israel since the Lebanon war.

A. *Humiliation*

In the months between September 1939 and May 1940, the Zionist movement in Palestine extricated from occupied Poland a group of Zionist leaders, among them Hareven's father and his family. Although she experienced the Holocaust only during its first months, as an eight-year-old child, Hareven has been able to recall events of personal and historical significance—the aspiration of Jewish secular intellectuals and the bourgeoisie in Warsaw to be emancipated from their "Jewishness" on the one hand, and the shock and humiliation with which these aspirations were abruptly cut off, on the other. Hareven has analyzed the lessons learned from this traumatic experience throughout her life and has chosen the short poignant story as a genre suitable to present her experience of the Holocaust. For Hareven the Holocaust was an event that occurred suddenly, exerting unpredictable potency, and leaving humiliating, incurable wounds.

In her story "*haddôdôt haggêdôlôt*" (1966) for example, Hareven returns to her childhood in Warsaw, viewing it as a participant and an observer at the same time. She ironically describes the daily tea times in her family home and the bourgeois, decadent extravagance of nouveau riche Jewish culture: the gentile names of all the family members, the pretentious visits to the theater, the use of foreign words, the piano playing. The ostentatious "ostrich feathers" the family were wearing demonstrate the aunts' extravagance, and at the same time symbolize the social and historical blindness that leads them to their tragic end.

In September 1939, the aunts did not come for tea anymore, but passed judgment by telephone: "We are lucky that the Germans are conquering us and not the Russians. With the Germans we are at least able to carry on a dialogue as we did in the First World War. A cultured nation that respects a cultured home." The aunts polished their good German and the golden frames of the paintings, did not hide the crystal and jewelry, displayed "lieder" of Schubert on the pianos, prepared tea and waited out the inevitable evil of the bombings and entrance of the occupiers. They agreed that it would be possible to invite the colonels for tea (1966, p. 57).

This is the closing paragraph of the story. The "end" remains untold; there is no one left to tell it. (This is the only story that Hareven admitted in a radio interview was autobiographical.)

Four of the six stories in *bēdīdūt* (1980) deal directly or indirectly with the Holocaust. In "bedidut," the title story, Jerusalem and its long-term residents inspire intense reconsideration of that desperate time. Doli Ya^caqobbos, a Holocaust survivor, is a middle class resident of the Old City between the wars of 1967 and 1973. She is married to an architect, a member of one of the most distinguished families in Jerusalem. While writing to her husband, who is vacationing in Malta, she contemplates:

Why would anybody need more than three or four streets around him, she often wondered. **Only someone who has never been a refugee longs for the sea and wide open spaces. And Doli Ya^caqobbos was a refugee only 25 years ago.** Even today she is amazed that they can light a fire in the house, that burns, burns and warms, and the rain remains outside, really remains outside (1980, p. 12).

The rain is a metaphoric rain. The cold chill of being a refugee is eternal and is not warmed by the heat of a flickering fireplace. There is no escape from it, even after 25 years. Despite the fact she writes to her husband "in a hand that is slightly outstretched . . . as if she sat and delayed and fashioned for herself a private handwriting," the signature reveals her existential fear—"the signature was very small and folded, a shelter within a shelter within a shelter" (1980, p. 10).

The Old City aggravates Doli's feeling of alienation. From the window of her house she can look out over the Old City, but feels uncomfortable about her situation. Doli feels that Grandmother Hayyah (her mother-in-law) is permitted to observe the City in this way, since "all this belonged to her," but Doli is nothing but a refugee who has arrived by accident. Doli is alienated, not only from the Jews born in Palestine or Israel and from the Old City, but also from her own home. "She always wondered about the meaning of a home." Her husband's family, one of the oldest families in Jerusalem, also aggravates her feeling of alienation. "She had

a strange feeling in her heart that the key [to her home] would not fit the door, and she would remain trapped outside."

Almost all Hareven's stories refer to a growing sense of loneliness, alienation and insecurity that originates in the Holocaust and intensifies through the years. She consistently defines her protagonists who arrive in Israel as "refugees," or "survivors," but never as "new immigrants." Her stories can be regarded as variations on this one theme.

Aharon Appelfeld, in his article "*al hargāšāh manḥāh ʿaḥar*" (1979, p. 35) speaks openly about what is essentially hidden in Hareven's works:

I feel like telling you one feeling, dominant and continuous, that shaped me and the members of my generation. As with every feeling, this feeling had a beginning. This was the spring of 1946. One year after the end of the Second World War, we arrived with a stream of refugees, children twelve and thirteen, short, lean, without knowing the language and without clothes. All that happened to us in the long war years was latent within us, silent and blind: an oppressive mass of mystery that had no contact with the consciousness. Obviously, we knew that we were free, but there wasn't anything in this happiness to assuage the humiliation of youth. The insult has quietly dimmed in the recesses of the soul.

B. "No One Was Left in the Desert"

The Miracle Hater (1983) and *Prophet* (Nābi², 1989) clearly mark a new phase in Hareven's short stories. The setting is Biblical, retelling the stories of the Exodus from Egypt and the conquest of the land of Canaan. The Hebrew is modified into a style that does not imitate Biblical forms, but uses Biblical diction and narrative techniques to create an authentic and powerful language. Amidst these new elements, Hareven's essential qualities are retained. Once again, through the recast Biblical stories, Hareven gives expression to the suffering of the alienated, the displaced, and the lonely. She utilizes the Biblical paradigms in order to look at current events from a historical perspective, and at the same time to retell the Biblical stories from a post-Holocaust viewpoint, the viewpoint of a person who has been dismayed with God and who evaluates national history pragmatically. While the theocentric Biblical narrative glorifies God's omnipotence and providence, Hareven, a Holocaust survivor, defies God and rejects metaphysics altogether.

Milka, a Hebrew hireling, gives birth to Eshkhar in hiding. Since she has been forbidden to bear children she entrusts her son to Baita, a girl only five years old. Baita lives among the Hebrews who fled Egypt's settled districts. When pregnant again, Milka is caught and brutally executed. The Hebrews retaliate. With tensions increasing, the Hebrews accept Moses' view that the time has come to leave Egypt.

Eshkhar grows up with Baita. She is his mother-sister whom he loves. When he is twelve, Baita's father arranges her marriage to an Ephraimite named Zavdi. Eshkhar unsuccessfully tries to prevent it. The elders laugh at his childish plea and Joshua mockingly prevents him from seeing Moses over the matter. Heartbroken and humiliated, Eshkhar leaves the camp of the Israelites. A few years later, Baita, although married and a mother of two, goes to look for Eshkhar. His love for her brings him back to the camp. They are reunited in secret, but after a short time Baita dies. Devastated by her death and furious with God he leaves the camp again. Now he explores the desert. During one of his excursions he breaks his ankle, which does not heal until he establishes permanent relations with Dina. She enters his life by surprise. Dina, like Eshkhar, is an outcast and does not know who her father was. Because she has conceived outside of marriage she is afraid, and lives outside the camp. She wants Eshkhar to testify she is his wedded wife. He agrees. They stay together and decide to join the Israelites in crossing the Jordan River on their way to conquer the land of Canaan.

The uniqueness of *The Miracle Hater* and its beauty stem from a balanced tension between the mythical and the realistic. Intent upon demythologizing Exodus, Hareven emphasizes the socioeconomic aspects of the story rather than the demonstrations of God's will and providence. As part of her personal approach, Hareven utilizes the Biblical paradigm of Exodus, as well as related Midrashic sources, in order to create an ironic analogy between the miracle maker Moses and the miracle hater Eshkhar.

Moses, the Biblical hero and son of Amram and Yokebed (who are of the tribe of Levi), is adopted by Bitia, Pharaoh's daughter: "she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, who made him her son" (Exod 2:10). He carries two prestigious pedigrees: he is born into the distinguished tribe that will establish the religious leadership of the Hebrew nation and, in addition, he is adopted by the Egyptian royal family. Eshkhar, on the other hand, is born without any identity and is presented without any pedigree. All we know about his mother is her social status: "she was a hireling." Hareven's purposeful neglect of Milka's pedigree refers ironically to a Biblical and Midrashic source: The Biblical Milkah, the daughter of Haran (Gen 11:29), was the wife of Nahor, the brother of Abraham, and it was said of her that "all the prophets of the world were Milkah's offspring."² The Biblical Milkah has a detailed and distinguished pedigree and all the prophets of the world are related to her as offspring. In contrast, Hareven's Milka is nothing but a hireling who is forbidden to

2. *Yalqût Šimʿony*, pârâšat "Bālāq" §766.

bear children since she is an Israelite. Thus her one child becomes illegitimate and is doomed to be the lowest outcast.

Hareven emphasizes the association of Moses with Eshkhar through the similarity of their surrogate mothers' names, Baita and Bitia. This analogy is carried further in the etymology of Moses' and Eshkhar's names. Bitia names the child she finds on the Nile—"Mōšeh, kî min hammayîm mēšîtiḥû"—Moses, because I drew him out of the water (Exod 2:10).³ Milka entrusts her son to Baita, saying, "his name is Eshkhar." The Biblical *šî-hôr*, commonly identified with the Egyptian "Pool of (the god) Horus" (p3-š-Hr), refers to the southern branch of the Nile (Ahituv, 1976). If the assonance between "Eshkhar" and "Shikhor" evokes the Nile, then both Moses and Eshkhar are connected to water. The circumstances, however, of Eshkhar's birth emphasize the contrast between them. While the Talmudic story tells us that "when Moses was born the house was full of light" (Megillah 14a), Eshkhar was born "in total darkness" (p. 8).

The book of Exodus describes the Exodus from Egypt as a one-time event, but some biblical scholars suggest that it occurred in at least two stages.⁴ Hareven follows this theory in her own way:

The Hebrews had multiplied greatly and not all of them could find work in and around Raamses. They descended on the province, innumerable flocks of men and women stood long hours in the sun, or sat in the shade of the baked-brick walls, looking for work . . . There was no way of getting rid of them. At the end they were forbidden to bear children. It was time they squatted elsewhere. It was time they went away. But the Hebrews did not go (1988, p. 7).

In Hareven's story the Hebrews are not enslaved, but unemployed. They are the proletariat ready to adopt an ideology which offers them redemption from their economic misery. At this time, Moses appears in the camps of the outcast Israelites. He seems strange to them; and while they talk about returning to their ancestral land, for Moses, "the point was to go."

In addition to the Marxist viewpoint that underlies Hareven's story, we should not overlook Freud, who argued that Moses was an Egyptian.⁵ According to Freud, Moses was a follower of the Egyptian Pharaoh Amenhotep IV (=Akhenaten), who tried to impose monotheism on the Egyptians

3. This is, of course, a folk etymology. More properly "Moses" should be derived from the Egyptian verb *msi* "to bear, give birth," which is frequently combined with a theophoric element to form Egyptian personal names (e.g. Ra-meses, Tuth-mosis).

4. Loewenstamm (1965, p. 756). Biblical scholars vary widely when it comes to reconstructing the Exodus (and the related settlement question) with opinions ranging from those who see a historical basis underlying the traditions to others who dismiss any claims to historicity.

5. Freud (1981, pp. 38–39) based his theory on E. Meyer (1906). It should be noted that few modern Biblical scholars would embrace Freud's position. See, for example, Redford (1987).

while oppressing the priests. After Amenhotep's death, riots broke out in Egypt, and the priests of Amon tried to regain power. Those known to practice monotheism and their supporters were at risk. Moses turned toward the oppressed class of Egyptian society hoping that they would accept his leadership and religion once they were outside of Egypt and away from its priests.

Hareven's article "*Iyyûnîm Miqqārôb*" (1981, p. 173) published for the first time in the periodical *Moznaim* in 1979, addresses Moses' dual identity and the price he has to pay to detach himself from his Egyptian milieu. The subject of dual identity reappears in *The Miracle Hater*.

They were more surprised than impressed by Moses' appearance. It was said that he killed an Egyptian; that he had fled for his life far across the desert, all the way to the distant Ancestral Land; and that, unapprehended, he had returned from there. Some said that he had two hearts in his breast, one Hebrew and one Egyptian, and that he had murdered the Egyptian one so as to leave no trace of it . . . Yet although he did not quite seem a Hebrew like the rest of them, there was nothing obviously Egyptian about him either . . . he spoke the Hebrew language quite clumsily . . . Sometimes an Egyptian word slipped from his speech, causing him to blush all over. **He told them that it was time to go** (1988, p. 14).

Although Hareven's intention is to demythologize the Biblical story, especially in details related to Moses' personality and the event of Exodus, she chooses to emphasize the mythical aspects of the desert mountains, as seen by the Israelites.

They had heard of the mountains of the gods, but these mountains were themselves gods, shapes of another world that could not even have been dreamed of in flat Egypt: little wonder that the gods sometimes spoke from within them, whether from the seneh or within the mountain itself (1988, pp. 49–51).

Hareven describes Moses in an ambivalent manner. On one hand, she follows the classical sources and emphasizes his modesty; on the other hand, she tries to detach him from the actual historical event. In *The Miracle Hater* Moses is not a charismatic leader. Joshua is the political figure who exalts Moses for opportunistic reasons, creating a class distinction between the people and their leaders. Eshkhar discovers Joshua's cynical attitude when he confronts him over Baita's marriage to Zavdi.

Joshua was sitting by the flap of the big tent, his curled side-whiskers gracing his broad moonface . . . ⁶ Spotlessly groomed, dressed all in white, he

6. Baba Bathra 75a: The countenance of Moses was like that of the sun; the countenance of Joshua was like that of the moon.

looked with disdain at the thin, grimy boy whose face was smeared with dirt and tears. What brings you to us, he asked, emphasizing to **us**. Eshkhar replied that he wished to see Moses. Joshua regarded him with a show of patience that was in fact nothing but impatience. **We** are resting now, he said. When **we** rest there is positively no entry. And after that **we** have business. Perhaps tomorrow. Perhaps the day after. If the boy would care to tell Joshua his problem, he, Joshua, of little account though he was, might be able to help. Eshkhar let loose a tirade of words . . . The thinnest of smiles flitted over Joshua's chill lips without passing from them to the eyes, and he said: We work miracles. Justice is not our concern (1988, pp. 32–33).

Moses, the ultimate prophet, and his aide—is justice not their concern?! Hareven is pointing out the real nature of “the miracle makers,” the fact that justice is only for the powerful. Joshua teaches Eshkhar the fundamental difference between justice and miracles. This experience transfers Eshkhar from the mythical stage, from belief in religious dogma, to an intellectual stage in which everything is subject to human and pragmatic criticism. This development begins when he no longer believes in the mythic image of a charismatic leader. Now he starts to explore the world. He learns that the desert has its limits, and succeeds in entering the land of the forefathers when the rest of the Israelites are still wandering in the wilderness. Now Eshkhar knows all that Moses knows and more. Eshkhar is Hareven's real hero.

In Hareven's story Eros replaces God. Baita represents the vital drives of life, for it is she who descends from “the mountain” and not Moses.

A year or two after this Baita went looking for Eshkhar . . . Eshkhar noticed her almost at once. As usual he was pasturing his flock far from camp, and the form of the woman that suddenly entered his vision, looming enormous on a nearby mountain, **shook his very being** . . . Eshkhar stared hard at her without moving, flooded by wave after wave of savage emotion. Then Baita descended the mountain and his heart stopped its terrible pounding (1988, pp. 60–61).

Eshkhar returns to the camp for Baita's sake. It is her death which completes his departure from any belief in God. “Eshkhar returned to his mountain. As a matter of fact, he did so, because he wanted nothing to do with God” (1988, p. 64). Isolation does not alleviate his pain or his anger. In fact, distancing himself from the camp handicaps him with a limp that seems symbolic of his social and sexual isolation. Although Eshkhar develops intellectually, his Oedipal love for Baita, the woman-mother, prevents him from maturing sexually and emotionally. Only through his relationship with Dina is he able to free himself from his past. Now he is able to join the Israelites and to cross the Jordan with them.

The development of Eshkhar's sexual and intellectual maturity and the realization of his existential loneliness leads him to the conclusion that his very existence is dependent upon having a family and a national identity. Now he is ready to make a pragmatic and utilitarian decision, not a romantic one, to reunite with the Israelites and cross the Jordan among them. However, he does not reconcile with God. Eshkhar crosses the Jordan river among the Israelites as **The Miracle Hater**.

In 1983 Israel was immersed in the political debate about the Lebanon War and its consequence and for the first time some soldiers refused to fulfill their military duty, feeling a growing conflict between their personal beliefs and their national obligations. At this time emigration from Israel reached frightening proportions and Diaspora Jewry and the State of Israel found themselves further and further apart on many important issues. It was at this period, when Israel experienced its most serious crisis since its establishment, that Hareven published *The Miracle Hater*. Responding to these events, she broke from the ironic and pessimistic conclusions, characteristic of her stories, and presented a story that offered positive solutions for both personal and national problems. The children of Israel wandered in the desert forty years until they were ready to take over the land of Canaan. It seems to have taken Hareven forty years to be able to present a story with a positive conclusion. At this time Hareven felt the need to emphasize that, however serious the personal predicament might be, the solution can only be found within a national context.

It is possible to read the story as the story of Eshkhar's transformation from an "alienated creature" into a man aware of his personal, social and national identity. But it is also possible to view the story as an allegory of the historical development of the Jews during the last century. This nation of outcasts is disillusioned with God and humankind, and has come to the conclusion that its existence depends exclusively on its own strength. The survivors of the Holocaust renew their personal lives through the family and re-establish their place among the nations through the State of Israel.

C. In Those Days and At This Time

Just as the book of Joshua relates to the book of Exodus, so *Prophet* is related to *The Miracle Hater*. The two Biblical books, as well as Hareven's novellas, should be considered two segments of one story—the transformation of the Israelite slaves into an independent nation within the land of Canaan. While in the Bible both stages of this historical process, the Exodus from Egypt and the conquest of the land of Canaan, are described from

an Israelite point of view, Hareven chooses to look at it from an Israelite point of view in *The Miracle Hater*, but a Canaanite in *Prophet*.

Hivai, the Hivaite prophet of Gibeon, loses his ability to foretell future events because of the fear and pressure of the Israeli invasion of Canaan. When the tension grows unbearable, he sacrifices a slave's child. After examining the sacrifice's intestines he comes to believe that Ai will be the only Canaanite city to survive the Israelites' attack. Hoping to save his beloved daughter (with whom he has sexual relations), he decides to send her to Ai. But soon Ai is destroyed and all its inhabitants are killed, including Hivai's daughter.

At this point Hivai, together with three other Gibeonite leaders, try to save their city by deceiving the Israelites into a peace treaty. Following the Biblical text (Josh 9), dressed in worn out clothes, patched sandals and with sparse provisions, they succeed in persuading the Israelites that they have come from a distant country to make a pact with them. While the other Gibeonites return to Gibeon after the pact has been achieved, Hivai decides to join the Israelites in his quest for a new and better God. Through the years he stays with them, he is unable to understand their culture. Their God remains a mystery for him. As for the Hebrews, they do not trust him. Finally they pay him off and send him away. Estranged from his people and unaccepted by the Hebrews, Hivai spends the rest of his life in total loneliness.

The events that trigger Eshkhar's growth in *The Miracle Hater* bring about the personal and cultural decline of Hivai in this story. The two protagonists develop in opposite directions. In the beginning of *The Miracle Hater*, Eshkhar is introduced as an infant, born without any identity, status or property. Hivai ends his life in that state. He starts off as a male in his prime age, head of a big family and an established leader in his community—a Hivaite prophet. Jericho's destruction greatly disrupts his life. Along with the Gibeonites, he is terrified. Misinterpreting the sacrifice's omen makes him realize that he has lost his ability to communicate with his gods, and current events seem to be beyond his comprehension. After his daughter's death, he feels that he has been deserted by his God. Hoping to find a better God, Hivai leaves his family and place to become a slave to the Israelites. For years he lives as an alien among them unable to understand their strange ways. They aggravate his frustration, since he finds among them no sign of their God. When finally he is asked to leave he resembles Eshkhar in every way. Hivai is also an impoverished outcast, completely isolated, lonely and indifferent. He is a man stripped of any identity.

In *Prophet*, as in *The Miracle Hater*, Hareven utilizes the historical essence of the Biblical story but does not adhere to its theological point

of view or rely upon its mythical details. The Israelites are not presented as mythological people but as a group of nomads trying to establish themselves as a nation in order to survive. In contrast to the Biblical narrative they are seen as pragmatists, not fundamentalists.

Although the two stories are not presented as allegories, it is impossible not to relate them to current events. Hareven focuses on the personal, national and human aspects of the events through which history seems to repeat itself. As a Zionist, she justifies the Jewish struggle for independence now as in those days. Yet she is very sensitive to the price that must be paid. As a refugee who has experienced an outcast's helplessness, she presents *Prophet* as a powerful reminder of the Biblical command so appropriate today: "You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deut 10:19).

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